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Language and smell: traces of synesthesia in premodern learning[1]

It is well known that, in present-day English, the verb 'smell' can obtain a negative connotation, when used intransitively; the adjective derived from it, 'smelly', is even lexically restricted to the meaning 'having a bad smell'. By contrast, speakers of English tend to allot more positive interpretations to the sense adjective 'tasty' (cf. Krifka 2010). That is to say: everybody with a healthy appetite would prefer 'tasty' to 'smelly' food. On the other hand, from a rather unexpected corner, *i.e.* computer terminology, an association between stench and syntax errors surfaced. It appears that the terms *CodeSmell* (alternative terms: *CodeStench* and *CodePerfume*) and *LanguageSmell* refer to the use of erroneous codes in computer programming (see http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?CodeSmell). 'If it smells, it's bad', seems to be the maxim of olfactory imagery in English. Things seem to have been quite different in some premodern Latin and Italian texts I encountered during my research on the history of the 'dialect' concept. In these writings, the image of 'smell', always expressed by means of the Proto-Indo-European root *od- (cf. ancient Greek ὀσμή), seems to be usually tied up with more positive features such as antiquity, purity, and naturalness, especially with reference to linguistic contexts. Since no studies on this topic are known to me, I would like to briefly explore some of these passages in the present contribution, so as to shed a little more light on this peculiar aspect of premodern language attitudes.

The Roman orators Cicero (106–43 BC) and Quintilian (ca. AD 35–ca. 100) offer us an interesting starting point. Driven by their concern for the use of a correct Latin on public occasions, they occasionally resort to the image of smell in order to picture the characteristics of 'good' language in general and appealing orations in particular. For example, to the question whether Demetrius of Phalerum spoke (good) Attic, Cicero replied: "I think that Athens herself can be scented through his orations" (*Brutus* 82.285: "Mihi quidem ex illius orationibus redolere ipsae Athenae uidentur"). In the very same work (21.82), he describes Servius Galba's speeches as "smelling of antiquity" ("orationes […] redolentes […] antiquitatem"). Although the context seems to be rather negative here – he describes the 'dryness' of Galba's rhetorical products – archaism is implicitly recognized as a positive feature, which Cicero likewise perceives in other great orators of the past such as Cato the Elder. In his *De oratore*, he also relies on the verb *olere* to express puristic prescriptions; this time, however, the image warns for all too excessive foreign particularities in speech.[2] Quintilian, for his part, tries to beware his readers of being accused of regional linguistic characteristics, a criticism to which even the famous historian Livy fell victim (there allegedly was some *Patauinitas* in him). For this reason, he advises that "all words and accent should smell like a native of this city" (8.1.3: "et uerba omnia et uox huius alumnum urbis oleant, ut oratio Romana plane uideatur, non ciuitate donata"), thus implementing the 'smell' image in a normative-puristic context (cf. Adams 2007: 195).[3]

Jumping to the later Middle Ages, I came across similar usages of the olfactory image linked to linguistic features. The Welsh chronicler Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrensis; ca. 1146–ca. 1223), for example,

[1] I have made Latin spelling uniform. Unless mentioned otherwise, the Latin passages are quoted from Brepolis' *Library of Latin Texts*.

[2] 3.44: "Quare cum sit quaedam certa uox Romani generis urbisque propria, in qua nihil offendi, nihil displicere, nihil animaduerti possit, nihil sonare aut olere peregrinum, hanc sequamur, neque solum rusticam asperitatem, sed etiam peregrinam insolentiam fugere discamus."

[3] Interestingly enough, this passage has been invoked by a so-called 'birther' to doubt Barack Obama's pure 'natural American citizenship' and his eligibility for the office of US president (for the precise context within which this passage appears, see the URL http://people.mags.net/tonchen/birthers.htm#ref04.05). The 'birther' in question is a representative of a more rational movement among 'birthers', in that he tries to offer objective counterarguments against the legitimacy of Obama's position as US president.

connects it with purity and antiquity, as Cicero and Quintilian had done before him. In his *Description of Wales* (*Descriptio Cambriae*) 1.6 ("On the delightfulness and fertility of Wales"; ed. Dimock 1868: 177), Gerald maps out the regional varieties of the southern part of modern Great Britain. Using the same Latin term as Cicero (*redolere*), he contends that southern English is purer ("magis […] incomposita") than its northern counterpart (which is 'corrupted' by Danish and Norwegian influences). He asserts that the former "smells by far more of antiquity" ("uetustatem longe plus redolens") and "preserves the property of the original tongue and the ancient way of speaking to a greater extent" ("originalis linguae proprietatem, et antiquum loquendi modum magis obseruat").[4]

At the end of the medieval era, the Italian poet and scholar Dante Alighieri (ca. 1265–1321), already on the verge of the Renaissance, elaborates upon the synesthetic imagery in his famous unfinished treatise *On vernacular eloquence* (*De uulgari eloquentia*; written ca. 1305), by introducing a panther into the discussion (see 1.16.1 and 1.16.4-5; cf. also Van der Horst 2008: 62-64). The exotic animal and the odor-guided hunt for it are employed to visualize his concept of the *uulgare illustre* (on which already many research has been conducted; see, e.g., Holtus 1989). After having 'hunted' in every Italian city and investigated the variety (or varieties) spoken in each of them, Dante feels compelled to admit that he has not been able to catch the panther that is the *uulgare illustre*. The metaphorical animal, even though "it emits its scent everywhere", "doesn't appear anywhere" (1.16.1: "pantheram […] redolentem ubique et necubi apparentem"). A few paragraphs below, the odor imagery reappears, although a reference to the panther is lacking. There, Dante contends that a common form of speech necessarily outshines locally restricted varieties; for all that is common to a whole people is better than everything that is particular and diversified. This is where smell comes in again; whereas the *uulgare illustre* "diffuses its odor in every city", it "has its bed in none" (1.16.4: "[…] in qualibet redolet ciuitate nec cubat in ulla"). However, the scent can be stronger in some areas than in others (1.16.5: "Potest tamen magis in una quam in alia redolere, […]"). Thus, largely relying on synesthetic imagery (in combination with the hunting metaphor), the Florentine poet is trying to define his linguistic ideal (an "illustre, cardinale, aulicum et curiale uulgare"; 1.16.6) as well as stressing its sheer unattainability.

I conclude this exploratory contribution by briefly touching upon two passages from the first half of the 16th century. The first is to be found in Baldassare Castiglione's (1478–1529) *Il Cortegiano* (the second redaction of 1528 in Cordié 1960: 60), in which the Greek dialectal situation is discussed (see Trovato 1984: 217). Here, a new element shows up; the olfactory figure is related to 'naturalness' of speech. Each non-Attic Greek writer chose to remain recognizable both "in his way of writing" as well as "at the 'odor' and peculiarity of his natural speech", in spite of the alleged superior position of the Athenian tongue.[5] The Picard philosopher and theologian Charles de Bovelles (Carolus Bouillus; 1479–1566), in his turn, falls back on the 'odor' image to discuss etymological links between contemporary tongues on the one hand and Latin and Greek on the other ("Quia autem immensum nobis exurgeret uolumen si recensendae istic forent hae uoces, cuiusuis linguae, quae uel Latinam redolent originem uel Graecam"), when discussing the vast and unregulated variety of vernacular speech in his 1533 *Liber de differentia* (p. 13). The quality of antiquity is – again, but this time more implicitly – linked up with scent.

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[4] It may, of course, be questioned to what extent the smell element in *redolere* was still present in the conceptualization of later authors such as Gerald. However, the ensemble of examples seems to indicate that most of them were conscious of the olfactory aspect of this verb (cf. its prominence in Dante's imagery).

[5] "[…] benché la ateniese fosse elegante, pura e facunda più che l'altre, i boni scrittori che non erano di nazion ateniesi non la affettavano tanto che, nel modo dello scrivere e quasi all'odore e proprietà del suo naturale parlare, non fossero conosciuti."

By means of this necessarily incomplete survey, I hope to have indicated that the 'synesthetic approach' of the authors discussed above may be an interesting perspective to tackle diverging evaluative attitudes toward language in premodern learning. Unlike the semantics of the English word 'smell' and 'smelly', the olfactory image is principally – but not exclusively – employed in more positive contexts (at least in Latin and Italian). It refers to varying features such as purity (often connected with normative stances; cf. Cicero, Quintilian, Gerald, and Dante), antiquity (Cicero, Gerald), and naturalness (Castiglione). Bovelles' reliance on the 'odor' metaphor in sketching etymological affiliations may be seen as an extension of the 'antiquity' feature. The majority of these authors were very influential throughout premodern history, so that it is not inconceivable that other scholars might have been inspired by them. Further research could help in mapping out to what extent this image was taken up in linguistic contexts (and to what extent the lexeme *od-*/*ol-* was still primarily connected with the sense of smell; cf. note 4 above).

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